



## R. Wayne Kraft Memorial Lecture



This annual lecture, part of the university's *Heritage Week* celebration (previously "Patron's Day"), offers a current theological viewpoint related to or informed by the spiritual tradition of the university's patron -- **ST. FRANCIS DE SALES**. Speakers of national prominence are invited to present this lecture on campus. The text that follows is provided for personal enrichment and is not intended as a commercial or professional publication.

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*Ex corde Ecclesiae* and the  
**MISSION OF CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION**

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Thank you, Dr. Chapp, for your introduction -- and also for the fine review essay of *The Dying of the Light* which you published last year in *The Thomist*. (It's a journal dear to my mind and heart, as you may guess!) I'd also like to express my gratitude to the Kraft family who are here tonight, not only for creating this lecture series, but also for giving me the chance to visit again with one of my Dominican brothers -- Kevin Kraft, O.P.

In keeping with the year-long theme for the inauguration of your new College president -- Fr. Bernard O'Connor, OSFS, whom I acknowledge and congratulate -- I'd like to spend some time speaking to you this evening with reference to *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the 1990 apostolic constitution of Pope John Paul II on Catholic universities. As you know, there has been a lot of talk about this papal document -- much discussion about its ideas, and not a little controversy over its implications. Tonight I'd like to explore with you the wisdom of this document in a broader context than it usually receives in public debates. In fact, it is my contention -- and my suggestion to you this evening -- that the full impact of this teaching of our Holy Father can only be understood when *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is read in the larger context in which it is promulgated to us.

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## **Introduction: Reading *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* in Context**

This larger view includes three vantage points. First, in its historical context, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* should not be read as something startling new, a sudden inspiration from the papal pen. It is, in fact, a *re-affirmation* of Catholic identity in education. There are no new principles here. But there is the call and challenge for Catholic institutions of higher education to stand up once again and be accounted for who they are and who they claim to be. What is new is the form in which this reaffirmation appears -- an apostolic constitution which succinctly presents the Church's understanding of higher education and which seeks to have its general principles adapted and applied to particular situations, like our own in the United States.

It is in those general principles, I believe, that we find a tremendous understanding of, and exhortation to, a Christian Humanist vision of higher education. It is a vision quite appealing to you who have St. Francis de Sales as your patron, and I will come back to the Salesian context for *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* toward the end of my talk. But it is not a separate or disconnected vision, focusing uniquely on the situation of modern colleges and universities. Rather, the vision which *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* sets forth is properly understood within the context of our Holy Father's overarching belief in, and consistent teaching about, the notion of divine wisdom in our world, especially as this is expressed in his encyclicals. In other words, to understand the principles that guide the life of a Catholic university today, we must see them in the light of our understanding of the essential elements of our Christian faith. And this begins, as do all matters of our Catholic thought, with our belief in the Trinity.

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## **Trinity and Truth: The "epistemic primacy" of the Doctrine of the Trinity**

### **Divine Wisdom:** *Trinitarian communion through adoptive participation in Christ*

At the core of the Christian message is the divine desire to share the communion of the Trinitarian life with creaturely persons. What Christ taught us and what we proclaim to the world is that the triune God invites all human persons to participate in the communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and with one another in them.

Creation, incarnation, redemption, church -- the central mysteries of the Christian faith find their deepest meaning in the reality of Trinitarian communion. Everything created exists so that the Trinity could realize this plan of love. Through the incarnation and the paschal mystery, Christ enables creaturely persons to enter into the life of the uncreated persons. In the church, the Holy Spirit unites all those transformed in Christ and draws them into the communion of Trinitarian love.

### **Christian Humanism:** *fulfillment not suppression of human nature and the human good*

From a theological perspective, the genius of Catholic thought arises from its underlying Christian humanism. As personal and social beings, the Christian faithful possess an inherent dignity and autonomy which must be respected if the ecclesial communion is to be realized. The reality of

communion presupposes the reality of persons in communion and, in an ordered community like the Catholic Church, the reality of institutions in communion.

This theme -- which is reiterated in all of the Holy Father's great encyclicals -- is fundamental for developing a properly Catholic understanding of the place of education and scholarship in human personal and social life. In Christian faith, the human reality is not suppressed but fully realized. To embrace the First Truth and the Absolute Good who is God is not to accept constraints on human reason and desire, but to free them for their divinely willed destiny.

### **The mission of Catholic higher education**

The mission of Catholic higher education is, in part, shaped by these commitments. The people who founded these institutions -- the people who founded Allentown College or Providence College by the Dominicans or the ten or fifteen Jesuit institutions, or the countless other institutions founded by religious communities -- believed that their labors were, at least in part, undertaken in order to bear witness to the fundamental truths about God, and about human beings in God's plan. And it is not unimportant to say that the people who contributed to their efforts believed that, too. They were not contributing simply to a human enterprise but to a divine enterprise. And that's why the mission of Catholic higher education cannot be separated from these truths. Now you could say, "Well, we want something else." And I would say, "Fine." But, it is not possible to say one wants something else and at the same time that one wants to claim the mantle of Catholicism and not be clear about these fundamental truths. It's just not honest.

So, if you said to me: "Well, how can you go from the Trinity to the mission of Catholic education?", I say, "Very easily! Let me show you the steps." The doctrine of the Trinity provides for understanding how all the truths of faith relate to one another. This is what the "epistemic primacy" of the doctrine of the Trinity means: knowing that God intends these things, and that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that God wants us to share his life -- that throws light on everything else.

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### ***Ex Corde Ecclesiae* in the Perspective of Recent Papal Teaching**

*Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is simply the expression of this vision of Christian faith in the particular circumstances of Catholic higher education. In fact, all Catholic institutions are struggling to recover and reaffirm the Catholic mission and identity which defined their origins. Here I would like to refer to four great encyclicals of our Holy Father, John Paul II, in the perspective that I'm calling "recent papal teaching." Why is this broader context necessary? *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is presented to us as a way of understanding what Catholic institutions ought to be within the framework of a very clear understanding of what it means to be human, what it means to be happy as human beings, and what God's gifts of nature and of grace entail for our proceeding on the course of life.

*Moral consensus about human nature and the human good (cf. **Veritatis Splendor**)*

*Veritatis Splendor* affirms that a moral consensus about what human nature is absolutely crucial for a happy life and for the integrity of society. Let me say why there is such a large Catholic commitment to presenting the "good" of human nature. Human beings are not simply presented with a multitude of possible choices, so that we could redefine what our nature is each time we decide. Let me explain this by way of a simple example. Tulips cannot decide where to grow. They don't say, "We do not want to bloom here." After they are planted, and, all else being equal, they later bloom. To move higher on the scale, consider the mockingbird. They do not say, "We're not going to have chicks this year." Tulips and mockingbirds and everything else in the natural order proceed to flourish according to their natural instinct. Tulips and mockingbirds do not embrace their flourishing as a species. The only creatures in the grand scheme of things who must embrace their good in order to flourish, and who can fail to embrace their flourishing are human beings. We cannot define what it means to flourish any more than a tulip or mockingbird can. Our natures are a gift of the triune Creator. But unlike all of the other creatures in the natural order, we can fail to achieve our flourishing by choice.

So there is a deep conviction in the Christian faith that God created human beings to flourish, and the gift of freedom is the God-given capacity to achieve this flourishing, or, as we also can say, to be happy. In the Christian understanding of authentic human freedom, sin is not the exercise of freedom but the failure of freedom. Because freedom is for the purpose of our being what God wants us to be, only we have to choose to be it. *Veritatis Splendor* is a revolutionary encyclical which has reaffirmed clearly a vision of the human, of human freedom and human happiness, which are deeply connected to what human beings are in God's sight. So *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is, in its basic thrust, an affirmation of the Christian vision of the human person and of the possibilities of the human being. God does not give us the moral law in order to suppress the human; he gives us the moral law in order to make human life possible.

*The eclipse of God and the culture of death (cf. **Evangelium Vitae**)*

*Ex Corde Ecclesiae* presupposes an analysis of the culture in which we live, and it is a culture in which we have found that the eclipse of the divine has turned out to be the greatest peril to human beings. Contrary to what we are told by modernity, which has insisted that the more God is erased the more space there is for us, we have found that the erasure of God has put us in danger. The result is that the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is supposedly the most enlightened of all previous centuries, has turned out to be the bloodiest.

*Evangelium Vitae* basically re-affirms the content of the fifth commandment. In the course of this re-affirmation, the encyclical presents a thorough analysis of the state of our own culture. And *Evangelium Vitae* wants to say that, contrary to what has been taught us, God is the greatest friend of human beings and that without God the human race is in trouble. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* presupposes this account and is basically challenging all Catholic institutions of higher learning to embrace and affirm a culture of life and to do so by being very clear about God and about the relationship of human beings to God -- and the liberating character of these truths.

*Foreclosure of the search for truth: undifferentiated pluralism (cf. Fides et Ratio)*

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the pope had to defend faith against reason, and at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the pope has had to defend reason against un-reason. This is remarkable. And don't think that the irony is lost on John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio* proclaims the possibility of discovering the truth, and this has direct impact on the nature of Catholic higher education because higher education, as we've constantly been told, is about the free pursuit of the truth. But we do have to believe that the truth can be found, or else the pursuit of it is doomed from the start. John Paul II is convinced that we cannot think of human beings in a context where it is certainly a matter only of many, many particular opinions of whether we can arrive at objective truth.

*Transformation of culture: responsibility for the wider society (cf. Centesimus Annus)*

The Catholic Church is not an isolated community. We are not uninterested in all that is happening around us. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is, in part, directed toward the cultivation of Catholic lay men and women who are not oblivious to this but who are committed to the transformation of human society into a just and loving society. *Centesimus Annus* is about our social situation and our collective responsibility for human society.

These three encyclicals have direct bearing on the way in which Catholic institutions of higher learning conceive of their mission. Let me say, at this point, that the teaching of these encyclicals in no way excludes non-Catholics from sharing in this mission; on the contrary, many of the non-Catholics who teach in our institutions want to embrace it. I recall that my biology professor at Providence College -- who was Jewish -- was probably thoroughly dedicated to the Catholic identity of the school. So the idea that these understandings of truth are so Catholic that they exclude non-Christians or non-Catholics, is preposterous. I'm sure that you probably have many examples that parallel my story of my Jewish biology professor.

If you think of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* within the context of papal teaching, you will see that it comes from a vision of the truth, a vision of human society and human culture, a vision of the way in which the Catholic Church is at the service of the wider world by being faithful to the truth that it has received, and that as soon as it begins to accommodate to a vision that eclipses that truth, it simply becomes one more of the voices of the wider culture that have no claim on our lives. There's no reason to affirm Catholic identity once one severs oneself from the fundamental convictions about how God's intentions toward human beings are actually transformative of human beings and human culture. That's why it is important not to read *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* simply as a document about how to rearrange the chairs to become a Catholic university. It's much larger and must be dealt with in the context of this vision of Christian faith and analysis of our culture.

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## **Challenge to the Academy: The Intelligibility of the Faith**

Now let us move more directly to the academy itself, and consider what is the impact of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* read in the light of the papal teaching which I've barely sketched here.

## The primacy of critical reason in modern theology

First of all, the fundamental truth and conviction of the Catholic faith about God is that God is truth and that God is intelligible. The modern view, which judges divine revelation with the canons of reasonability, needs to be corrected.. In the Catholic tradition, the definition of theology is seeking the truth about God: "*fides (faith) quarens (seeking) intellectum (intelligibility)*." Why is this? Because God is endlessly intelligible. There's no end of coming to understand God. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is proclaiming a vision of the human reality in which the more deeply we strive to penetrate the truth of God, the more we come to the truth about Him, the more we see all of these things as connected and how everything we know about human beings can be seen in God's light.

### Reasonability and intelligibility: *the hierarchy of truth*

The hierarchy of truth has been treated as if it were a doctrine about how the different truths of the faith are ranked. In this sense, the doctrines of the Trinity and Christ are really important, but teaching about the intrinsic evil of direct contraception or about the perpetual virginity of Our Lady are less important. On this reading, the hierarchy of truth chiefly the level of authority of various teaching. I believe that this is a mistaken view.

Consider an analogy. We are all bodies, with fingers, ears, noses, hearts, livers, brains, and so on. If you said to me, "What is your most important part?" I'd probably say my brain or my heart. Then, if you asked, "Are your brain and your heart more important than your pinky?" I'd say, "of course." Then if you asked whether I would part with my pinky, I'd say "No! I'm not prepared to part with one square inch of my body, no matter how unimportant it might be." The point here is that my heart and my brain are central for my body to function. The point is that my pinky cannot function apart from my heart, my brain, my central nervous system. Because my pinky or my ear or my toe or any other minor bodily parts are less important than my heart or brain does not mean that they dispensable, or that I'd be prepared to part with them. We are not willing to part with any of our parts, even those apparently less important.

One might say that the heart and brain are integrative of the whole body. Similarly, the hierarchy of truth is a doctrine about the integration of all Catholic truths around the Trinity, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. In this perspective, the hierarchy of truth means that we have to understand teaching about sexuality in connection with the truth about the Trinity, not that the teaching about sexuality is dispensable. We cannot understand any one teaching when it is not connected to the core. So, the Catholic vision is a vision of the truth; and the truth about God, in all of its complexity, is a whole. Although not every element of it is of equal weight, none of it makes sense if it is disconnected from the trinitarian and christological core.

This is a remarkable and powerful thing. It is, in effect, saying that we see everything from God's eye view. We think from God's eye view. John Paul II is strong on this: our faith invites us to address every topic -- whether sexual morality or the perpetual virginity of Mary or the sacrament of penance -- to address every topic and pursue its connection to the center. That's what the hierarchy of truth is, and that's what the Christian vision of the unity of knowledge and, I'd say, the integrity of divine wisdom, is all about. And this is very important. Now, it is not to say that

theology is the only important subject in a university. That would be absurd. But it is to say that, in the end, the truth of the Catholic view in the wider culture is to understand everything in its connectedness. This even includes engineering -- after all, this lecture series is named for an engineer not a theologian, someone who understood that nothing in the human reality can be fully grasped without seeing it in its connection to this core. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* makes no sense apart from this connection.

### **The nature of theology as an intellectual discipline**

Theology is an intellectual discipline. Like others, it is deserving of a place in the university's scheme of things. This is because God himself is the one who is the object of the knowledge which theology offers. Why the Church is interested in theologians being in communion with her is because theology is a discipline of revelation, of understanding God making himself known to the apostles and to their successors who, today, are the bishops of the Church.

### **Divine mystery: *not impenetrable opacity but endless light***

Theology is concerned with the mystery of God. But what do we mean by "mystery"? I remember one of my cousins, who for a period of her life had lost her faith and by God's grace has now returned. She told me about her difficulty in understanding all this. She recalled how the nuns would say to her, whenever she asked a difficult question, that "it's a mystery." After a while, she concluded that if everything is a mystery, a mystery, a mystery, then what can we know? So we cannot use the expression "mystery" to create an aura beyond which the human mind cannot go. It's not that we can pursue the truth about God up to a point and then are stopped at a wall. On the contrary, the divine mystery is not that things are unintelligible to us. The "mystery" here is not that we come to a dead end, but that we never stop.

The high degree of emphasis that Catholics have placed on rigorous thinking proceeds from this conviction about God's hyper-intelligibility. This is not saying that human beings are incapable of knowing God, but that God wants and invites us into his light, that we might learn more and more about him. This is why we have a vision of knowledge which affects not only theology but all fields in the university -- philosophy, the sciences, etc. As one Protestant theologian has said, the great contribution that Christians can make to the academy is to emphasize a vision of integrity or integration of all knowledge and not its fragmentation or isolation.

### **Integrating power of the Christian vision**

When you think of life from the perspective of God, when you think of all knowledge from the perspective of divine revelation, you have the power of integrating thought which does not suppress reason. Recall, again, the example of R. Wayne Kraft -- faith in God does support a robust commitment to scientific inquiry. I'm not saying that once we affirm the truth about God, nothing else is important, which is the way some people frame the issue. It is not a matter of placing so much emphasis on God to say that there's a Catholic way of teaching mathematics! These disciplines have their own integrity, but they fit into the integrating vision of the Catholic university. This integrating vision is what *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is trying to affirm.

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## **The Salesian Charism in Education: Intellectual and Spiritual Formation of the Laity**

The Salesian charism fits quite naturally, like hand in glove, with what I've been saying. It reminds me of a story from the recent bishops meeting. I heard a story recently about a conversation between a Catholic and a Methodist in which the Methodist asked, "What is the meaning of 'Methodist' in Southern Methodist University?" and then answered his own question by saying "Nothing!" He went on to say that the loss of such schools to the has meant that the church has a far smaller pool of educated laity who possess a clear sense of what it means to be Methodist and who will continue to be in some sense the strength of the Methodist church. I thought this was a remarkable point, and it actually deeply impressed a lot of the people who heard it. It's not just a question of saying what the term "Methodist" means; it means not just the loss of institutions; it's a loss to the Church, that it is no longer possible to count on having a laity educated in the Methodist tradition upon whose shoulders the responsibility of the Church will be laid. The man concluded by saying: "Don't let this happen to the Catholic colleges and universities in the U.S." This story highlights the important role Catholic higher education fills in the formation of intellectually and spiritually well-grounded lay Christian people. Here at Allentown, we can say that this is exactly what the Salesian charism is about. I want to make just three points about this.

### **An "intelligent faith": *the danger of credulity and irrationality in the religious sphere***

First of all, contrary to what is often said, and this is clear in *Fides et Ratio*, the greatest danger to authentic religion is not skepticism but credulity. In the name of religion, people appear to be prepared to believe the most absurd things. Part of the goal of Catholic higher education is to provide an intelligent grasp of religious matters so that people are not susceptible to every kind of crazy idea that comes down the pike. For, when people stop believing in God, they don't end up believing in nothing, they'll believe anything. The vacuum caused by the eclipse of well-founded religious beliefs is not atheism or agnosticism, but religious credulity.

Our institutions of higher learning have a great responsibility to be committed to the spiritual and intellectual formation of the members of the Church.

### **True faith: *countering the preoccupation with the "epiphenomena of transcendence"***

Very much related to this is what I call the "epiphenomena of transcendence." What do I mean by this? Never before have people in our world been more interested in angels than now. Bookstores have shelves and shelves of books on the subject. I teach about angels, so I think it's great. But it's an epiphenomenon -- the bizarre, the odd. There are at least two television shows about angels, and lately, in the last couple of years, there have been two very successful movies about angels. This is all very interesting, but what true Catholic higher education tries to transmit is the understanding that transcendence is in the first place about God, not about the cultivation of spiritual powers. Catholic education is in part concerned with trying to convey to young people the

truth about God and about the relationship to God of the so-called spiritual realm or spiritual order -- what Paul called the "principalities and powers."

### **Catholic contribution to public debate**

Here I call your attention to the document published by our Bishops' Conference, called *Living the Gospel of Life*. Contrary to what is often supposed, an affirmation of these truths of the divine wisdom about the destiny of the human person and of the vision of human nature, these are not privatizing God. They do not lead people to gather into sort of self-contained clusters oblivious to the wider world. When they are authentic, they have a profoundly outreaching movement. The deepest faith moves us to embrace the poor. Just look at Mother Theresa or St. Catherine of Siena, or many of the hundreds of saints who, much to the horror and revulsion of their sisters and brothers, would embrace the most sick and deformed of persons. The authentic Christianity which I affirm here -- which the Church affirms here -- is not privatizing; it pushes out to the world beyond. We cannot be followers of Christ and not care for the sick, the dying, the poor, and the homeless.

And this is also a profound responsibility of Catholic higher Education -- to continue to remind students, faculty, and alumni about their material success, which many have achieved. Graduates of Georgetown University and Notre Dame, not to mention Allentown College and others, have done very well. Part of the obligation we have is to heighten their consciousness, and in this area Catholic institutions have been remarkably successful. We are to heighten their consciousness about their obligation to help those for whom Christ came the most. We have something important to contribute to everything that bears on the public and common good.

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### **Conclusion: "*the thoughts of many hearts may be laid bare*" (Luke 2:35)**

Today is the feast of the Purification, a great feast of the church celebrating when Mary brought the child Jesus to the temple and was met by two elderly people, Simeon and Anna. They are remarkable because when we suppose at the end of life that we ought not to be looking for anything, it is then that they have the opportunity to see with their own eyes the savior of the world -- Simeon first, then Anna. Now Simeon says, among other things, that with this child "the thoughts of many hearts may be laid bare."

The truth of Christ is the truth that in this child -- there only a baby but in the end to be crucified on the cross and risen to glory -- in that one, that person, in that human being is the deepest meaning of human life to be found. As our Holy Father said on the occasion of his installation, "only Christ knows what is in man." Christ looks into our hearts and lays them bare. He reveals our deepest aspirations, both personal and social, our longings, our aspirations for the ones we love. And in him we find the fulfillment of everything we could hope for, indeed, of all we could ever imagine.

So when I say in my title that the mission of Catholic higher education is informed by divine wisdom, it's really a divine wisdom about the human reality. And we have nothing to be

embarrassed about. On the contrary, it is a message that the world is dying to hear and sometimes, because of our reluctance, dying from not hearing.

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