



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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DeSales University:

A NEW ERA OF EXCELLENCE

academic convocation, 24 January 2001

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There is a strong presumption evident in the use of the name "university" as distinct from the name "college" that lies at the heart of today's celebration. What was once "Allentown *College* of St. Francis de Sales" is now "DeSales *University*." For those of us who gather here to celebrate that distinction, it is entirely appropriate that we discover what that presumption is.

The word "university" derives its origin from the Latin term *universitas* which means "association," usually "an association of people." It applies to a concrete thing around which people gather not merely to an idea. Of course, an idea gives rise to the thing and the thing itself conjures up all kinds of ideas but the thing and the people who constitute it are its primary reference points. For our purposes this evening, we will consider "university" at one and the same time as a thing --- an institution --- and a people gathered around it --- a community.

The notion of university as an academic institution that houses an academic community --- that is, a community of teacher-scholars and learners --- has its roots

in the early Middle Ages and, more precisely, in the Church of that time. "The university was, in its earliest stages, one of the most significant expressions of the Church's pastoral concern."¹ From the apostolic era to the present day, the teaching activity and authority of the Church has been recognized and affirmed many times. As early as the second century A.D., ecclesiastical authorities manifested some concern for formalized Christian education in many metropolitan centers; in fact, by 826, Pope Eugene II had ordered that Church schools and teaching faculties be instituted everywhere.² That the universities established in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were Church instituted or approved indicates that the Church has certainly paid careful attention to the role of schools of higher studies within society and to their relationship to the Church, especially in the teaching of the philosophical and theological disciplines.³ The history of these institutions and their relationship to the Church is a long, interesting and complex one but much beyond the pale of our consideration here. Suffice it to say that the Church was present and active from the beginning of "the university" as such. It should also be noted that these medieval institutions created under Church auspices experienced a diminution of religious influence within the space of a few hundred years.

To speak of centuries, even millennia, is not uncommon in the vocabulary of world or even western history. The language of the history of the United States is much less expansive. Within our brief history as a nation, however, we witness an experience of American universities not unlike that of their medieval counterparts.

The first American Catholic school of higher studies was the College of Georgetown, established in 1789 on the banks of the Potomac River. Its founders argued that

Persuaded that irreligion and immorality in a youth portend the most fatal evils to subsequent periods of life and threaten even to disturb the peace and corrupt the manners of society at large, the directors of this institution openly profess that they have nothing so much at heart as to implant virtue and destroy in their pupils the seeds of vice. Happy in the attainment of this sublime object, they would consider

1. Congregation for Catholic Education, The Pontifical Council for the Laity and The Pontifical Council for Culture, *The Presence of the Church in the University and in University Culture* (Vatican City, 1994), p. 5.

2. James J. Markham, *The Sacred Congregation of Seminaries and Universities of Studies*, Canon Law Studies, 384 (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1957), p. 1.

3. David M. O'Connell, C.M., *An Analysis of Canon 810 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law and Its Application to Catholic Universities and Institutes of Higher Studies in the United States*, Canon Law Studies, 516 (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1990), p. 2.

their success in this alone, as an ample reward for their incessant endeavors.⁴

By the time of the foundation of Georgetown, many other institutions of higher learning were already in existence in the United States, among them Harvard (1636), Yale (1701), Princeton (1746), Columbia (1754) --- all with some religious connection. The fact of the matter is that ... until the later nineteenth century it was conventional for colleges in the United States to be identified by association with a Christian church. Their founding, faculty, students, funding, piety, morality and religious study (but not much other study) were braided together into a cord that tethered college to church. ... the early educators themselves were usually people in ministry.⁵

It is also a fact that the most prestigious and enduring of these American institutions lost their religious identity with the passage of time. How "religious" was their religious identity? In his controversial volume The Dying of the Light, author James Burtchaell has claimed that

... the religious identity of most of these colleges was, as they began, circumstantial and indirect. ... It is fair to say that while every one of these colleges was from the start identified with a specific church, denomination, or movement, there was no manifest intensity in that identification, no very express concern to be intellectually confirmed or critical within the particular faith of their communion.⁶

They developed by and within religious denominations and were administered by its members. Piety existed alongside of the communication knowledge but, at least in the mind of some, religion was the context and not the reason for being of early American institutions of higher learning. Their primary role was to impart a classical-humanistic ideal --- "life according to reason" --- as the foundation of liberal education. The teaching faculty assumed responsibility for that role. The leadership (administration) embraced the task of promoting morality and devotion. As this division of labor became more pronounced, the emphasis upon reason prevailed. American colleges, offering basic preparatory curricula in the humanistic arts and natural science, gradually became centers for the advancement of knowledge at the highest levels or "universities" according to the more ancient

4. Archives of Georgetown University, #62-9, *College of Georgetown (Potomack) in the State of Maryland, United States of America*, p. 1.

5. James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), p. 819.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 822-823.

European models. And herein lies the presumption and distinction that I mentioned earlier. The task for the American "college" was more basic, more fundamental: teaching and learning. The task for the American university was more advanced and research-oriented: the production of new knowledge.

The exception to this development can be found in American Catholic institutions of higher learning of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries where the academic model was not the European university of the later Middle Ages but, rather, the convent or monastic school of the same period. That is not to say, however, that the traditional humanistic disciplines and natural sciences were ignored. American Catholic colleges offered a good liberal education not as a goal in itself but as the servant of religious faith, morality and piety. I hearken back to the founding documents of the College of Georgetown referred to earlier. Here is where, according to American Church historian John Tracy Ellis, Catholics in the United States broke stride with their academic counterparts, a trend that continued here well into the 1950s and 1960s. Unfortunately, at least according to Ellis, Catholic higher education of the nineteenth and early twentieth century became wedded to this moralism while colleges and universities established by other Christian denominations developed a broader approach to the intellectual advancement of the nation.⁷ The end result, in Ellis' opinion, was a perceived intellectual and scholarly mediocrity among Catholic academicians --- perceived by their non-Catholic peers --- which, in the past century, has driven them to become more recognized for scholarship among their religiously "liberated" or "disengaged" academic peers than for denominational loyalty and affiliation. I wonder, as I serve The Catholic University of America where he lived, how Father Ellis would find or describe the situation today? He would find a different experience of society and cultures, a different experience of Church, a different experience of higher education in general and, as a result of all of these, a different responsibility for Catholic higher education in particular. I believe he would be both surprised and pleased.

In ordinary conversation, people in the United States outside the academy --- and even some people within --- do not distinguish the notion of "college" from that of "university." Certainly no one would doubt that Boston College operates as a university but without the name. Because both expressions refer to higher education, most of us use the terms interchangeably. After all, as Shakespeare wrote in Romeo and Juliet, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."⁸ With all due respect, I beg to differ with the Bard. Here I would consider myself more semitic than semantic. A name identifies the thing. A university is different from a college, not merely by virtue of the name but by substance as well. We gather tonight because the "rose" now known as

7. Ibid., pp. 351-388.

8. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, ii, 43.

DeSales University smells sweeter than before. It is this sweetness that we celebrate!

When it was first founded in 1964, Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales was the only Catholic college for men in the newly created Diocese of Allentown. The Oblates of St. Francis de Sales generously accepted the invitation of Bishop Joseph McShea to pursue this initiative and rightly so since their beloved founder was, himself, a classical Christian humanist. Alvernia College in nearby Reading, part of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia at the time, had been established six years before as a Catholic college for women. By 1970, Allentown College became co-educational and Alvernia College followed suit in 1971.

What has transpired for Allentown College in the intervening years has been a remarkable story of growth, progress and excellence, owing much to the inspiration and vision of its Oblate founders and to the dedication and commitment of its faculty, staff and administration. When the decision was made to pursue "university" status here, it was inspired by the realization of academic excellence, the recognition of faculty commitment, and demonstrable growth in graduate education --- the usual hallmark of university status --- all within the context of a dynamic and vital Catholic heritage. That final characteristic, although frequently challenged within the academy, is the engine that has driven the institution and its community and that has generated the change. Catholic identity. Catholic character. Catholic purpose.

A university must pursue research and the advancement of knowledge at the highest levels. That is what a university does. It is not enough to present a liberal college education to an undergraduate population and professional training to graduate students. A university, while drawing deeply from the font of truth, possesses the freedom --- in fact, the obligation ---to create new knowledge that affects life and society and culture and that effects change in the same. It is propelled by the scholarly research and commitment to the whole truth of the faculty and the students of such quality that it earns its place alongside the intellectual contributions of the best and the brightest. The words of your President, Father O'Connor, reflect that assertion:

The new name embodies our character and charts a new and exciting future for the University. The name "DeSales" pays homage to our spiritual foundation and will be an ever-present reminder of the University's purpose: to bring knowledge and faith together for the betterment of humanity. The historical use of the word "university" stresses an education that is all-encompassing and flows out of the humanities, of which St. Francis de Sales was a strong proponent.

All of us in the university world know the challenges and the responsibilities that lie ahead of us, Catholic and non-Catholic alike: the mastering of scientific

development and rapidly changing technologies; the influence of globalization; the quest for economic and political stability; protection for the environment; advocacy for human freedom, social justice and cultural diversity; the devaluation of the person and human life; and, through it all, the quest for meaning. That the university world should make a positive impact upon and contribution to these areas is the bread and butter of what we are and what we do as university. For us in the Catholic university world, these same challenges and responsibilities lead us to conclusions that are born not only from academic or scholarly research but also, and more importantly, from the Gospel of Christ and from the heart of the Church, *ex corde ecclesiae*, where the ancient universities first began, where the fullness of truth resides and where Catholic universities today must live and move and have their being, whether their peers accept them or not. Quite frankly, religious institutions of higher learning create the diversity for which American education is praised. They contribute or should contribute something positive, something unique and something different. "What's in a name?" A great deal, if what the name identifies is true.

As a Catholic institution of higher learning, we *seek the status of university* here because we can identify points of similarity with our secular counterparts who possess the name and we eagerly enter into dialogue with them. As a Catholic institution of higher learning, we *earn the right to be university* because we advance knowledge and the search for the whole truth in the fullest possible way as we continue that dialogue, fueled with the conviction of faith and unambiguous in the public demonstration of Gospel values. We do this in our research, in our teaching, in our service and in the inspiration and witness of a campus spiritual life. Without this, precisely as a Catholic institution of higher learning, we have no reason to seek and no right to be.

Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, wrote with marvelous clarity about this in his apostolic constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*:

It is the honor and responsibility of a Catholic university to consecrate itself without reserve to the cause of truth. This is its way of serving at one and the same time both the dignity of man and the good of the Church, which has "an intimate conviction that truth is its real ally ... and that knowledge and reason are sure ministers to faith." Without in any way neglecting the acquisition of useful knowledge, a Catholic university is distinguished by its free search for the whole truth about nature, man and God. The present age is in urgent need of this kind of disinterested service.⁹

9. John Paul II, apostolic constitution "On Catholic Universities," *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, I, article 4 (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1990), pp. 5-6.

In the performance of this service, he continued,

It is essential that we be convinced of the priority of the ethical over the technical, of the primacy of the person over things, of the superiority of the spirit over matter. The cause of the human person will only be served if knowledge is joined to conscience.¹⁰

We cannot be among those who, as he wrote in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, "run from the truth as soon as they glimpse it because they are afraid of its demands."¹¹ No member of the DeSales University community is exempt from the challenge and the responsibility to be true to our name and our mission. What makes this university different is not only a change of name and its resulting academic imperatives. What makes this university different is its mission, articulated so well in your own statement:

... to provide men and women with a liberal education in the Catholic and the Salesian tradition, emphasizing academic excellence, individual attention, a community experience, mutual concern and preparation for careers. Our purpose is to enable students to become Christian humanists in a Christian way.

And, so, tonight we celebrate Catholic continuity and strength of resolve --- characteristics as old as the Gospel itself --- as well as a rite of academic passage and change --- circumstances that begin here with the new millennium. And what you will accomplish as a university and a community within it is the realization of an ideal voiced by St. Francis de Sales himself long ago:

Man is the perfection of the universe; the mind is the perfection of man; love is the perfection of the mind; and charity is the perfection of love.

"What's in a name?" That is for you to reveal. Thank you.

10. *Ibid.*, I, article 18, p. 17.

11. John Paul II, encyclical "Faith and Reason," *Fides et Ratio* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998), article 28, p. 44.