

# Newman's "Idea" for Catholic Higher Education (Part 1)

## Fostering Love for Learning, Promoting the Liberal Arts

By Father Juan R. Vélez

SAN FRANCISCO, FEB. 22, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://Zenit.org)).- Blessed John Henry Newman (1801-1890), an Anglican convert to Catholicism, made many notable contributions to theology, philosophy and literature, but one of his most significant was to the understanding of higher education contained in his "The Idea of a University."

During this week in which we celebrate Cardinal Newman's birthday -- Feb. 21 -- it seems worthwhile to recall some of the basic principles of his educational philosophy. Applying some of Newman's ideas to the current situation of Catholic colleges and universities in the United States, one could postulate what Newman's proposals would be for the renewal of the Catholic identity of these institutions.

Universities originated as cathedral schools in medieval Europe and soon became important places of learning for not only clerics, but also for laymen. In these centers of learning, theology and philosophy were studied together with rhetoric and mathematics. Soon other sciences developed and it was in the Catholic universities that modern science was born in Europe.

Pope John Paul II wrote: "Born from the heart of the Church, a Catholic University is located in that course of tradition which may be traced back to the very origin of the University as an institution. It has always been recognized as an incomparable centre of creativity and dissemination of knowledge for the good of humanity." [1] Yet today, most people are not aware of the great tradition of Catholic education.

Many Catholic institutions of higher education have lost their Catholic identity. In these institutions, as in almost all universities, there is a complete fragmentation of learning. For the most part the moral and spiritual life of students is neglected, and often science is pitted against religion and theology, even in Catholic institutions.

As described in a recent essay published in ZENIT by Kevin M. Clarke, the Land O'Lakes Conference had a very harmful effect on Catholic education in North America [2] to the point that most Catholic institutions of higher education resemble secular universities except for some religious buildings and disembodied traditions.

At the O'Lakes Conference, 26 presidents of Catholic universities subscribed to the idea that: "To perform its teaching and research functions effectively, the Catholic university must have a true autonomy and academic freedom in the face of authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community itself."

The notion of "academic freedom" as the right and duty to dissent from Catholic teaching and obedience to the bishops as teachers of the faith has created confusion among Catholics and weakened the Church's power to evangelize. Today a renewal of the Catholic identity Catholic higher education is of paramount importance for the vitality of the Catholic Church and the life of society.

## Six proposals

In his lifetime, Newman only dealt directly with some problems regarding the Catholicity of a university and moral life of its students, but there is much that can be learned from his writings and work as an educator. The following are six proposals, which are at the core of his educational philosophy.

1. University education should foster love for learning. In the "Idea of a University," Newman defended the notion that knowledge is an important good in itself. The knowledge of philosophical truths and history are a great good even when there are no immediate applications. Without ignoring that society needs people trained in professions and practical skills, universities must maintain an ideal of learning that fosters knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Otherwise the notion of God, the person, good and evil, truth and beauty are impoverished and sacrificed to expediency and material outcomes.

To advance this end, Newman would propose that Catholic schools should have obligatory courses in Western civilization and thought, which in the past were common in the curricula of universities. Secular universities such as Princeton and Columbia offer survey courses in Western civilization as electives. In these courses students can become familiar with key ideas in history, philosophy, literature and political science. So many students graduate from Catholic universities ignorant of basic knowledge of the lights and shadows of Western civilization and the Catholic contribution to thought. Newman resisted the trend in the England of his time to neglect studies in the liberal arts and moral philosophy.

As a keen observer of human nature, Newman argued against the idea that material sciences make men moral: By itself knowledge does not make people good. This is the province of moral virtue: "Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk; then may you hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion and the pride of man." [3]

2. Catholic universities must teach theology to all its students and help students to see the relationship between theology and different sciences. Newman explained that natural theology, as the study of God, is the highest science. The exclusion of this science at the university would negate the claim to the pursuit of "universal knowledge" at a university. He explained that theology has a bearing on every discipline and other disciplines have a bearing on theology. Knowledge is a whole and no part of it can be rejected without detriment to the whole.

Newman wrote: "In a word, Religious Truth is not only a portion, but a condition of general knowledge. To blot it out is nothing short, if I may so speak, of unraveling (sic) the web of university teaching." [4]

In addition to natural theology, students need to have basic knowledge of revealed theology. Instead, in many Catholic colleges students are offered courses in comparative religions, and left with poor or no knowledge of Catholicism and Christianity. For a college to have a true Catholic identity it must be connected with its rich Catholic Tradition and teach theology in obedience to the bishops and the Holy See. A correct understanding of academic freedom should not justify positions that contradict the faith and dissent from revealed teaching of which the hierarchy, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is the authentic interpreter.

Blessed John Henry Newman offers four other proposals for a renewal of the Catholic identity of Catholic higher education: insistence of the harmony between faith and reason; an ardent commitment to Catholic truths; pursuit of virtue within a catholic culture; and a proper assimilation of thought outside Catholic tradition. We will discuss these in part II of this essay.

#### NOTES

[1] Pope John Paul II, apostolic constitution "Ex Corde Ecclesiae," Aug. 15, 1990, No. 1

[2] Kevin M. Clark, "[Benedict's XVI's Call to 'Intellectual Charity'](#)," ZENIT, Feb. 11, 2011.

[3] John Henry Newman, "Idea of a University," p. 121.

[4] Ibid, p. 70.

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## Newman's "Idea" for Catholic Higher Education (Part 2)

### A Place for Faith and Reason, Moral and Intellectual Leadership

By Father Juan R. Vélez

SAN FRANCISCO, FEB. 23, 2011 (Zenit.org).- Blessed John Henry Newman (1801-1890) founded the Catholic University of Ireland in 1854, and as its rector he wrote "The Idea of a University." His thoughts on university education are a perennial source for inspiration, and a challenge to universities and colleges, especially those that are Catholic.

Cardinal Newman wisely put forth that idea that a university should

foster love of knowledge and that theology, as an integral part of the whole circle of knowledge, should be taught at Catholic universities.

During this week in which we celebrate Cardinal Newman's birthday -- Feb. 21 -- it seems worthwhile to recall some of the basic principles of his educational philosophy. In Part 1 of this article, we looked at the first two of six proposals that constitute the core of his educational philosophy. Below, we look at the last four tenets.

3. A Catholic university should seek to explain the harmony between faith and reason as two complimentary paths to knowledge. University presidents and department chairs should have the conviction that faith and reason are not at odds. Only in this manner can they and their colleagues assist students in understanding the proper relationship between faith and reason, and between religion and science.

When a student who majors in biology, psychology, English or history truly understands how faith sustains a healthy and authentic vision of the human person and society, then a university has fulfilled a large part of its formative role as a Catholic institution. On the other hand, when a graduate has lost his faith studying some secular career, we can consider that the university has, in some degree, failed to help the student, or has even contributed to his loss of faith. The board of trustees and professors of Catholic universities should share this concern for the unity of knowledge.

Understandably, Pope John Paul II's apostolic constitution "Ex Corde Ecclesiae" (1990) on the renewal of higher Catholic education and its implementation in the United States calls for the majority of the members of the board of trustees of a Catholic university to be "Catholics committed to the Church," and for the president to be a Catholic.[1] Professors are expected to understand and respect the Catholic identity of the university, and professors of theology must have a "mandatum" -- an acknowledgment that the professor is committed to teach authentic Catholic doctrine -- from the competent ecclesiastical authority.[2]

Identity and purpose

4. A Catholic college should be characterized by an ardent commitment to Catholic truths about God, about man, about the world and society. It cannot compromise in matters of dogma. Newman dedicated his life to fighting the idea of relativism in religion. When a Catholic school loses its faithfulness to this commitment it loses its identity and

purpose. Catholic respect and commitment to truth plays an important role in decisions regarding the selection of professors, study programs, guest lecturers, honorees, etc. In keeping with the nature of learning and a long Catholic tradition, rigorous intellectual debate is fostered, but with complete faithfulness to the magisterium.

John Paul II reaffirmed the legitimate autonomy of a university within the confines of truth and the common good. But the academic freedom of professors must be understood in the context of the institution's relationship to the Catholic Church. In "Ex Corde Ecclesiae," John Paul II wrote: "One consequence of its essential relationship to the Church is that the institutional fidelity of the University to the Christian message includes a recognition of and adherence to the teaching authority of the Church in matters of faith and morals. Catholic members of the university community are also called to a personal fidelity to the Church with all that this implies. Non-Catholic members are required to respect the Catholic character of the university, while the university in turn respects their religious liberty." [3]

5. University education is as much an education in pure and practical knowledge as in moral life. The goal of Catholic colleges and universities is to educate men and women who will practice the faith in their respective professions and walks of life. As a young teacher at Oxford, Newman disputed with the director of his college who neglected this aspect of college education. Newman was convinced that students needed mentors in their religious and moral life, not only in their academic endeavors. He deplored the abuse of drinking and other debauchery on campus, and the superficial and irreverent participation in religious services.

Benedict XVI, speaking at the Catholic University of America in 2008, said: "Truth means more than knowledge: knowing the truth leads us to discover the good. Truth speaks to the individual in his or her the entirety, inviting us to respond with our whole being." [4] He further pointed out, "With confidence, Christian educators can liberate the young from the limits of positivism and awaken receptivity to the truth, to God and his goodness. In this way you will also help to form their conscience which, enriched by faith, opens a sure path to inner peace and to respect for others." The Pope described the work of Catholic educators as intellectual charity, "which upholds the essential unity of knowledge against the fragmentation which ensues when reason is detached from the pursuit of truth." [5]

Newman also taught the classical wisdom that a man ends up thinking the way that he lives, and that religious knowledge is connatural with virtue. In other words we can know moral truths if we are prepared for them by an upright life. As John Garvey, the newly elected president of the Catholic University of America, recently explained with reference to Newman -- virtue and intellectual life are inseparable.[6] Our Catholic universities should foster a climate in which professors and students share intellectual and spiritual gifts within a robust cultural life. This vibrant Catholic culture at Catholic universities is a condition for virtue to flourish – virtue understood as striving for excellence in both scientific and moral matters. In this Catholic environment students should be able to find mentors who are both practicing Catholics and competent teachers in their fields of knowledge.

A large number of Catholics study in secular universities. They need to find good spiritual and moral support from Catholic educators and clergy at these universities. Newman wished to offer this assistance to Catholic students at Oxford University by establishing an Oratory of St. Philip Neri in the city of Oxford. His dream was only realized after his death. Today there are various organizations that help provide this intellectual and spiritual support, such as the Newman centers, Oratories, centers of Opus Dei and other Church affiliated institutions. Catholic dioceses should, however, do more to provide Catholics with this indispensable support and to provide students with a deeper intellectual and spiritual formation.

Part of the conversation

6. Lastly, a university is Catholic if it contributes to the good of the Church and society. As has been the case in past centuries Catholic universities should play a leading role in the intellectual and moral life of a nation. And they will do this better if they are true to their roots and Catholic identity.

At the same time, Newman taught that Catholic thought has a power of assimilation and incorporation of what is good outside the Catholic Church. It engages in this vast and difficult work of appropriation, which is a critical and constructive dialogue with other thought, incorporating what is good while discerning what is evil and rejecting it.[7] Professor John F. Crosby has put his finger on a major problem affecting the identity of Catholic universities: it is not the need for "academic freedom" but the need of a proper assimilation from secular culture of what is good and true.

Cardinal Newman believed that university education is the pursuit of universal knowledge and truth, and that a good Catholic university must be committed to scientific excellence. However, a Catholic university must teach theology and be committed to the truths of the faith to truly be both universal (catholic) and Catholic. Newman defended the university's service of the whole circle of knowledge and truth, and the unity between faith and reason. Furthermore he continues to challenge Catholic colleges and universities, inspired in this rich Catholic tradition, to dialogue with secular culture and exert an evangelizing influence.

#### NOTES

[1] "The Application for Ex Corde Ecclesiae for the United States," June 1, 2000, Article 4,

[www.usccb.org/bishops/application\\_of\\_excordeecclesiae.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/bishops/application_of_excordeecclesiae.shtml)

[2] Ibid.

[3] Apostolic constitution "Ex Corde Ecclesiae," No. 27.

[www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apc\\_15081990\\_ex-corde-ecclesiae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae_en.html)

[4] Address of Benedict XVI at the Catholic University of America, April 17, 2008:

<http://publicaffairs.cua.edu/Releases/2008/PopeBenedictSpeech.cfm>

[5] Ibid.

[6] "Intellect and Virtue: The Idea of a Catholic University," John Garvey, Jan. 25, 2011.

<http://president.cua.edu/inauguration/11Inauguration.cfm>

[7] Proceedings from the 30th Annual Convention of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars, Sept. 28-30, 2007, "Cardinal Newman and the Idea of a University, How the Gospel encounters the Culture in the Catholic University, Some Lessons from John Henry Newman." John F. Crosby, pp. 13-24, p. 22.

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author of a forthcoming biography on Newman. For information on this and Newman visit [www.newmanbiography.com](http://www.newmanbiography.com).