SOME SPECIAL CHALLENGES FACING A CONTEMPORARY CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

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Introduction
There are a multitude of challenges that affect a Catholic university in the world today. At the outset, it seems sensible to establish some of the principles that appear especially relevant to the welfare of Catholic universities in the decade ahead. By way of introduction, I think there are eight main principles that affect the formation of a Catholic university now and for the future. None of them is entirely separate from the other; and many of them relate quite closely together.

Before I select among them, I think the set of principles to choose from are:

1. A Catholic university should, by the nature of its Mission, be student-centred.
2. A contemporary Catholic university should be a place where faith and intellect meet in the growth of human potential. The spiritual and intellectual development of the human person should be its prime goal and the Catholic ethos must be orientated to that growth in every way.
3. Integration of the Catholic ethos into the university is essential and a key component of the formative process that defines a university’s Catholic identity. Such an identity should reflect Gospel values, the endless search for moral truth, justice and ethics; and in a contemporary university these values should be integrated through the curriculum and the entire university environment. The principles and values that define its Catholic identity should be visibly evident in all of the university’s policies and practices.
4. All disciplines being studied in a university must serve that integration process. Philosophy, Theology and Religious Education may play a special part in the university’s armamentarium for growth of the human person.
5. Catholic universities should engage publicly on issues of serious social relevance to the community both inside the university and outside it, and these issues should be a natural part of the agenda relevant to the university’s Catholic Mission.
6. The human community of which we all are a part is properly enhanced by our service to each other and to those inside and outside our own University community, particularly those outside it who are in need. The gift of community in a contemporary Catholic university is a key integrative force in a university, which has justice-vision. A Catholic university must have, and communicate, such a vision.
7. In the future, a Catholic university should take a leading role in forging a Higher Education identity that is truly Catholic in an era of uncertain change. Such identity is visibly changing, and will undoubtedly change further.
8. A Catholic university must be seen to be at the cutting edge of the task of meeting all of the above challenges, if its integrity and its reputation are characterised by true worth.

With this list of interlocking principles established, I want to abstract just three special challenges; each is in turn related in some way to the set of eight principles. The issues I have chosen are: the integrative formation of a Catholic identity (which is enacted by the

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practice of all eight of the principles), the constant search for a purpose and meaning in life (which threads through all of the principles), and the need to be contemporarily relevant (which projects Catholic identity in well-defined and visible ways). All of these represent important ways of adapting to the stresses of difficult times ahead.

These issues occur within a context defined by the Catholic Church and, in part at least, by the Government of the day. The challenges posed by them represent only a sample of those that must be met to satisfy the demands of a worthy university. The three issues that have been selected, however, serve to reflect instructively on how each is related to the other and how, importantly, each bears in its own way upon the overarching task of defining a true Catholic identity in the next decade.

The Formation of a Catholic Identity
There are multiple challenges in forming and shaping a Catholic university in the world today, but the overarching challenge lies in the task of defining a Catholic identity for the university. This is a very complex task defined by many people in different ways, and it poses multiple challenges in and of itself. The task of forming an identity is necessarily ongoing, and paradoxically, must never pose a static solution. Being Catholic and being a member of a university community are two interlocking processes that interchange constantly, and the process of successful adaptation requires that this mix be dynamic.

A Catholic university is a place where there must be ongoing dialogue between faith and reason, a clear infusion of Christian ethos and Catholic values, and where the Catholic ethos must animate the relations between students and staff, as well as the interactions of staff and students among themselves. It must be contemporarily relevant to both society’s and the Church’s needs.

For some, there is a tension between being Catholic and being a good university, while for others this is not so. If tension does exist it inevitably revolves around the practice of the principles of academic freedom and academic autonomy. How does one achieve a learning environment where Catholicity is visible and operative everywhere and where there is an unfettered commitment to academic excellence? Unquestionably, for a university to be a good one, it must be a university in the full sense of the word where the pursuit of truth is unrestrained.

As Steinfels and others have argued, sustaining and revivifying Catholic identity are the chief challenges facing Catholic higher education today, and I agree with their conclusion that the task of forming a Catholic identity must remain ultimately in the hands of the Faculty. No identity can be established and permeate a learning institution without the participation and commitment of the majority of Faculty members, and the thrust of that force lies not just in the hands of some of the staff, but with all.

One of the indirect effects of the current debate about Ex Corde Ecclesiae is that the task of forming a Catholic identity is seen to rest too pointedly with those responsible for single disciplines. This has created too much attention on the link between Catholic identity and single disciplines (e.g. Theology). Though Theology is crucial, Catholic
identity is integral to the entire scholastic domain and the nature of the total university environment.

A more balanced approach has to occur in a multicultural society such as Australia aims to be, and Catholic identity must reach out to affect the scholars of other faiths who in turn must themselves be committed to the Catholic Mission and its integrative force within the institution as a whole. As O’Donovan has argued, a sign of a healthy university is the fact that a full range of concepts and ideas can be expressed openly and in the spirit of free scholarly dialogue. Students, Faculty, and other staff have the right to full freedom of thought and its expression. This should occur in a university even more so when the university is infused with a distinctive ethos that in turn gives full and rich opportunity for reflection upon and discussion of Catholic thought and teachings, which should be illustrated by the university’s curriculum, liturgical services, student services, ministry, and academic and general staff programs. In the words of Cardinal Clancy, “A Catholic university enables the Catholic point of view to enter fully, publicly and equally into the great debates of our time where that point of view will stand or fall on its own intrinsic merits”.

The Constant Search for Purpose and Meaning in Life
The processes of forming a Catholic identity and fostering the growth of the human person ultimately define a particular purpose and meaning in life. As indicated above, a Catholic ethos stresses a commitment to values embedded in the Gospels, ethics, sensitivity to justice, respect for others, and the inculcation of trust, tolerance, and responsibility. The Statements of the Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities cannot be practised without recourse to these. Graduates who are sensitised to Gospel values and the principles of justice must be highly responsible people in a world that is increasingly challenged ethically, and there is a special responsibility in a pluralistic society facing us in the decade ahead to think and behave in a tolerant and non-discriminatory way. A constant and consistent set of values such as these offer a defined sense of purpose and meaning which gives coherence in a life for many where they have to cope with an endless set of moral possibilities - denoting an absence, rather than presence, of meaning.

There is a special challenge in this remark for a university, which is public in its character. Australian Catholic University is the only Catholic University in Australia that is a public one, open to all. It is a member of the Unified National System of Higher Education in Australia, the Association of Commonwealth Universities, and the International Federation of Catholic Universities. It was established by the Federal Government in early 1991 and something of its distinctive history has been captured very well by Timothy O’Hearn in the October, 2001 issue of this journal.

The public character of a Catholic institution highlights in a special way, I believe, the issue of spirituality, which has increasing relevance to our society today. The spiritual needs of students who are Catholic interface directly with the integration of the Catholic ethos into the institution as a whole. Such an integration assists in giving meaning and purpose to those students who are not Catholic. The Catholic Mission of the university
should not be seen to dictate the personal growth of students who choose not to define their search for meaning in terms of Gospel values. What the public character of a Catholic university does is to highlight the task of how best to cater for and meet the spiritual needs of all students – Catholic, members of other religious communities, and persons not believing in God. If education is to foster the growth of the human person, it must reach out to all students to foster human potential in proactive ways, and it should do so by projecting Christian values in ways that are tolerant of other people’s differences.

Meeting the spiritual needs of students is paramount in today’s society which many see as spiritually featureless. This is particularly reflected in today’s emphasis on the so-called Enterprise university. The notion that university education is geared primarily to commercial interests and to the production of economically useful outcomes has characterised the direction in which many universities are moving today. A Catholic university is, and must offer, an alternative to this push in the future. It is not that there is no potential benefit in the delivery of profits and in the exploitation of commercial interests. These outcomes are important. There is much more to university education than these, however. Higher education in Australia today is being pushed into a spiritual vacuum partly because of the resources, which exist to finance it. This emphasis is becoming consolidated; the notion of university-as-business is now becoming the norm.

Universities are businesses, if considered in revenue terms, and they are major contributors to the country’s export earnings, but one must understand that they are contributing in these ways at the same time as public sector grants are declining, and competition for students is increasing. The justification of both these sets of events has forced universities to look for benefits to higher education other than those that characterise the training of moral citizens concerned with social responsibility.

Considering the focus of Government ‘on significance and strategic relevance, the pursuit of national goals and priorities and the furthering of industrial capability, it is essential to recognise that significance and excellence are both important. The two obviously intermix, but should never be fused. And there is a spiritual component to excellence that is nearly always overlooked or by-passed.

The world today is beset by violence, racial divisiveness, mass injustice and serious threats to personal, cultural and global survival. Education has more than ever an urgent task to provide a sense of purpose and meaning to cope with these onslaughts. A Catholic vision provides one way to do that. Sensitively structured within a university environment and orientated to all students, it has immense potential to produce moral benefits. In many ways, spirituality is a formidable mediating concept; it has special relevance for all who share in common a sense of searching for meaning that underscores a Catholic vision which projects coherence into an uncertain future.

There are many peripheral, but important, issues for education that suggest themselves for further exploration. What does the Catholic Church say about people’s search for meaning in today’s educational setting? What are the factors that help influence the
spiritual development of students and staff? And what is the most appropriate way to communicate meaning and purpose through contemporary educational structures and university curriculum? Answers to all these questions share in common, knowledge essential to addressing the challenge of locating and communicating a genuine Catholic identity in the world today.

Each of the eight principles I have outlined poses its own special challenges and I have singled out to date just two (the task of forming a Catholic identity, and the search for purpose and meaning) and discussion has introduced the concept of spirituality. I would like now to address the special challenge of relating to the human community through engagement on matters of contemporary social relevance.

The Need to be Contemporarily Relevant
A Catholic university needs to be aware of the university as a human community that must deal effectively with the spiritual realities and moral challenges of the world around it. One of the functions of a university is to fulfil its duties to Church and society by engaging on matters of moral and social relevance. Cardinal Henry Newman has described a University as a place that must prepare its students for life. For Newman, the art of university training ‘is the art of social life and its end of fitness for the world’.

Engagement with the human community is not just service to the community through imparting knowledge about social issues and problems. Engagement is a reciprocal process whereby communication is backed up, if possible, by interaction in ways that can effectively alter the way the problem is perceived by oneself and others. Genuine engagement moves beyond the level of mere service and allows the opportunity for societal response to help redefine the nature of the problem itself and perhaps forge new solutions. The very character of this process helps to structure the contribution of the university to social change. As for Newman, the university makes that contribution best when it focuses on its primary vocation to be a centre of scholarly research and communication.

Let me offer two examples to illustrate the nature of this specific challenge. One is drawn from the impact of the events of September 11, 2001. The other relates to matters of contemporary concern to the Catholic Church, in particular.

When terrorists struck at the Twin Towers of the Trade Centre, New York, USA, the world changed significantly. Violence was perpetrated on a massive level, war between nations and religions became imminent, economies were shattered, and global threat was introduced that is as yet unresolved. The impact of these events is unfolding now and will significantly affect us in the decade ahead. Universities have an obligation to react to their community not only by informing those around them about scholarly opinions on the issues but by interacting with them to allay concerns about the threats involved, and also to educate themselves about others’ response to their scholarly views. How do such events highlight patterns in world religious conflict? How does research bear upon the pathology of the perpetrators involved in the wrongdoing? What are the obligations of a Catholic university for communicating its views to allay distortions in others’
perspectives? What are the lessons for being more tolerant? How does university scholarship best listen and educate itself about where moral understanding of the academic issues should lie? Through learning via the engagement process, in what ways might its views be misguided?

Let us move to the second example. There are social issues that are of immediate concern to the Church and by nature of its identity; they should be of concern to a Catholic university also. One example is the role of women in the Church in modern times. The current role of women in the Church leaves much to be desired. Recent examination of the issue both at a national and state level indicates levels of participation that fail massively to do justice to the true capabilities of skilled Catholic women. The distress of many women is evident in the data as also the complacency of men who work among them. An institution concerned with spirituality, meaning and purpose has a special duty to respond. Research tells us much about the skills and capabilities of women and how they might be able to participate in the governance of the Church. What special example does a Catholic university have to play in realising the potential of women in senior management, and in fact educating itself and the Church about the need for reform?

Part of what a Catholic university can contribute is coherence in looking at or evaluating matters that spiritually and academically belong together; and from such evaluation important links can emerge. University education should be concerned primarily about moral truth and thus should argue for the importance of major social issues related to the dignity of the person and human responsibility. In doing so, it will locate associations that give spiritual meaning to matters academic and which are part of a Catholic university’s distinctive Mission. Such ways of looking at knowledge and truth necessarily lead us to look across disciplines and engage in dialogue, which makes at times novel connections. At a cultural level, the benefits of doing that are subtler and are more important than simply examining what is usefully relevant. And it is this kind of inquiry, in particular, which can highlight the spiritual character of what is being studied.

In the past, universities have often inadvertently prevented their constituents who have been most affected – namely, staff and students – from coping with and understanding the genuine importance of evaluating spiritual meaning. That must change in the future.

The Political Context
Any Catholic university exists in a context, which is defined religiously, socially and politically. In relation to a private university, the Catholic Church largely defines that context, especially if most of the funds being received come from the Church. For a public Catholic university, that context is defined by the Catholic Church, but also by Government, which affects both private and public Catholic universities in different ways.
A key document for a Catholic university (public or private) is *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (From the Heart of the Church, which is Pope John Paul’s apostolic statement on the constitutions of Catholic universities released in Rome on 25 September 1990\(^5\). The document is still heavily debated more than 10 years after it was first written. It represents the core document of the Catholic Church on its vision for appropriate goals of a Catholic university, the rules for a good university, how the university should operate in a secular context, and how a Catholic university can be an active arm of the Catholic Church. Tensions that result from debate can be creative and dynamic; however there is nothing in the concept of a Catholic university (public or private) that is alien to the harmonizing of the teachings of faith and reason.

Few Catholic universities, as *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* says is appropriate, actually carry on a systematic examination of the activities of the Church and rarely is there an attempt to evaluate them objectively, except where the tensions between religious and secular interests spill over to result in divisiveness – such as the perceived threat to examining the truth without conditions placed upon the nature of the examination. Conflict of this kind inevitably erupts about the issue of the juridical relationship between Church and university on matters relating to the authoritative teachings of the Church. This issue, that of the Mandate, and how the Mandate is to be applied in a university setting are matters that are being debated heavily at the moment across universities and even within the Church. The principle that is likely to resolve the debate in the future is acceptance of the fact that Bishops, while not entering directly into the internal governance of universities, are nevertheless important participants and agents of interaction in the life of the university precisely because the university is part of the life of the Church. Both the Bishops and the Catholic university have their own distinctive set of goals, rules and obligations, but it is the unity of their communion, which categorises their joint participation as complementary activities\(^6\). As Tripole argues, in this way the Catholic university has a double relationship – one to the store of universal knowledge and the other to the Catholic Church. That relationship defines a truly Christian presence in a university and is entirely consistent with *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*.

Current debate about *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* has served to keep alive, and in the forefront of our consciousness, the very values that define a Catholic identity and which provide a genuinely Catholic character to help us define tertiary education in the future. Current debate energises scholarly articulation of what constitutes Catholic identity and paradoxically has served to stress the importance of freedom of thought as it affects sound scholarship. However, the debate has also served to highlight the necessity for the Church to formulate its educational role in a modern world and Catholic universities need to dialogue with the Church about the evolution of that role. This is not an argument that in any way challenges the relevance of Catholic tradition. Rather, it asserts the primary importance of tradition but requests a careful statement of a Catholic Mission of higher education where the question of Catholic identity should be addressed in ways whereby students and staff can engage mutually in the fostering of a true commitment to the Catholic tradition of intellectual life.
Conclusion
This article outlined eight principles, which were offered at the outset, as being needed to characterise higher education in Catholic universities over the next decade. Three interrelated challenges relating to these principles have been examined in particular: the integrative formation of a Catholic identity that is oriented around growth of the human person, the constant search for the spiritual meaning and purpose in life, and the need for Catholic universities to engage with their community in a scholarly but active way. What matters most in the work conducted by staff at a Catholic university is the quality of students’ learning, students’ spiritual growth and professional development as guided by a distinctive (Catholic) ethos.

The practice of these principles necessarily occurs in a particular context defined by both Government (especially if public funds finance the Catholic university) and by the Catholic Church. A key statement, which defines the nature of the association between the university and the Church, is Ex Corde Ecclesiae. This statement raises many matters for debate and has served very usefully to engender wide consciousness about the values and ethos lying behind an especially worthy Catholic university. As in other ways, a Catholic university locates its Catholic identity by searching for meaning and purpose in a world in which the value of the human person has all but become tragically lost.
1 J. Pittau, *Catholic University in the new Millennium*, presentation at Satellite Conference (Australian Catholic University, Sydney, September 2000).


6 E. Clancy, Inaugural Address as Chancellor of Australian Catholic University (Sydney, ACU April 1992).


15 Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities*.