

## **The Service of Faith in Academic life**

In some respects this is a natural topic for me, a specialist in medieval philosophy. The central role of philosophy at a Catholic university, even at a Jesuit/Marymount university is revealed in the famous title to LeClerq's study "The Love of Learning and the Desire for God." In the three major western religious traditions: Christianity, Islam and Judaism, the spiritual journey of faith is informed by the human desire to understand reality, to know what is true and to act out of that knowledge. The intellect is our highest spiritual faculty, one that is only fully satisfied by experiencing and knowing the truth.

In my reflections today, I would like to consider the following questions: what might the service of faith mean for a faculty member? What might the service of faith mean for the university core curriculum? Finally, what might the service of faith mean for the student? Indeed, the service of faith at an institution of higher learning like LMU must mean more than it would in a parish, in a civic organization or in an ordinary fellowship group devoted to personal development and outreach.

So, first, how might we understand the service of faith as faculty? The heart of the Catholic Intellectual tradition is the affirmation of the relationship between reason and faith. This means that no authentic human question: whether in science, the humanities, or the arts lies outside the domain of inquiry. Academic and intellectual inquiry belongs to faith traditions, in several ways:

- 1) first, as propedutic to faith: academic disciplines raise human questions in an authentically human way. As faculty, we encourage students to ask questions,

to think more deeply, to move continually on the road of understanding. These human questions and attempts at answers are spiritual nourishment for us, as rational beings.

- 2) Second, academic and intellectual inquiry challenge faith to explain and deepen its own self-understanding. This invaluable service helps us clarify what we believe and why we believe it; it moves us from naïve faith toward reasoned faith: a critical adult stance toward the domain of the Transcendent.
- 3) Finally, academic and intellectual inquiry can help to defend faith. Here, the rational recognition of coherence and consistency within a religious tradition, a body of doctrine or a particular teaching actually promotes a deeper appropriation of the faith tradition within which a person finds herself.

My second question, what does the service of faith mean for the academic curriculum?

Here I think we can consider our own project to renew our core curriculum. And the best way to reflect on this might simply be to ask a series of questions: How might the internal logic of the core curriculum experience serve in the proclamation of the Gospel? How might our core intellectual and human experience offer each student a moment of personal transformation? Perhaps the three elements I have just presented could frame some part of our answer. In other words, how does our core curriculum (or how might it) raise authentic human questions for serious consideration, in each of our classes? How does the curriculum at LMU challenge students' own faith, in that creative and critical way that moves a person from superficial naïvete to a deepened grasp and understanding, not simply of what we believe, but why we believe what we believe. How does it, finally,

offer students help to see the coherence and consistency within their religious tradition? How does it assist in a deeper appropriation of their faith? And specifically, for this university, how do we, in Theological studies and Philosophy, for example, help students understand the Catholic faith, even if they are not themselves Catholic?

Finally, as to my last question: what might it mean for the student? Again, I would ask this both on the micro level and the macro level: how do our students experience their own education in each class and in their cumulative experience over four years? Why is it that at the Commencement liturgy, students reflect on their years here (in the post-communion slide presentation) only in terms of activities outside the classroom? Why do we not see slides of students engaged in intense debate and discussion over issues that matter to the academic vocation of this institution?

A final comment. As we affirm the connection between the intellectual life and the life of faith, we must also recognize that the intellectual project has its limits. Human reason cannot come to the end of an analysis of Mystery. The silence of a man like Thomas Aquinas at the end of his life, the conviction of Moses Maimonides that we do better to negate, rather than affirm, when we speak of God, the conclusion of Al Ghazali that the conclusions of the great thinkers are, at the end of the day, no more certain than those of the believer—here is the stance of great thinkers who have encountered the Holy and whose intellectual careers were forever changed. This is the silence that affirms, both the grandeur of the divine, the dignity of the journey to understand, and the limits of the self.