

# Strengthening Catholic Identity

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## 4TH OF A SERIES: FAITH AND REASON

The Catholic Intellectual Tradition views faith and reason as mutually complementary sources of wisdom in the quest for truth. Grounded in a conviction that it is God who creates, the harmony between faith and reason is the foundation and inspiration for the distinctiveness of Catholic higher education. This pamphlet is offered as a resource for those on Catholic college and university campuses who seek to appreciate the accord between faith and reason.

### Sources of Wisdom

Through the lens of faith and reason, we gaze at the universe with wonder and gratitude as we seek to discover God's purposes. We have a great responsibility to use our gift of reason, always informed by faith, to gain ever deeper understanding of ourselves, our world, and our role as stewards of God's creation.

For the believer, God is the source and the end of both faith and reason, which each seek the ultimate reality, that is, truth. Because of their unity of origin and final orientation, reason and faith are not in contradiction. Rather, any apparent contradictions are an invitation to pursue fuller understanding. This highlights the need for openness and persistence in the patient quest for knowledge. Because we are in constant search for truth with the ultimate goal of holiness, research and learning support this quest. They are, then, God-like activities, and are ways in which we can seek and find God.

### Faith and Reason in Catholic Higher Education

Knowing through faith and reason has a long history. Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, the writings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, and even the most recent papal writings constantly emphasize the importance of the dialogue between faith and reason. The recognition of this critical dialogue has remained a steady component of the curricula of Catholic colleges and universities to the present day.

In Catholic higher education, the pursuit of knowledge is best accomplished when faith and reason are viewed as mutually illuminating components of discovery. The relationship between faith and reason provides the context for the Church's involvement in education and a shaping force in curriculum design, the role of theology, faculty hiring, and the engagement of the university in the wider community. Although faith and reason are integrative, it is useful to consider each separately to appreciate their unique components of knowing.



**Faith** involves the reliance on centuries of theological reflection on God, God’s purposes, and God’s invitation to humanity to be co-creators of a world marked by justice and commitment to the common good. Catholic higher education’s distinctiveness lies in how it places questions of meaning, a theological worldview, and a deep sense of the ethical implications that flow from these as important allies in the dialogue with the secular sciences and approaches to knowledge. This is the case both for the curricula as well as for faculty scholarship. In addition, any curriculum at its best offers opportunities to incorporate coursework learning into service learning and retreat experiences, providing students with the insights that arise from the interplay of faith and reason. Using knowledge acquired in class enables students to integrate new knowledge into faith experiences.

**Reason**—through exploration, inquiry, and rigorous research—ensures sound scholarship. As is apparent across Catholic and non-Catholic higher education institutions alike, reasoned inquiry and rational thinking are central components of college and university academic missions; they enable the discovery of meaning and explanation. What makes Catholic higher education unique is that we are *not limited* to using these standard investigative, analytical, critical, and problem-



solving procedures and purposes alone. Rather, through the unity of faith *and* reason, scholars within Catholic higher education are free to incorporate into their scholarly work the search for meaning. The integration of faith with reasoned scholarship demonstrates that even the most rigorous research is never at odds with faith, but rather can be a mechanism to more fully understand truth and God’s creation.

This respect for reason, for its exercise in imitation of the Creator, for its involvement in the partnership of creatively contributing to the common good, is the singular contribution of Catholic thought to a coherent and persuasive body of knowledge. It gives meaning to the fundamental principles on which an ethical code and a system of laws can be established. It lays the foundation on which a liberal education of the whole person can be constructed. It is the reason for including professional schools of medicine, social work, business, and law as means by which the university contributes to the life of the community. It defines in a distinguishing manner the mission of Catholic higher education.

### **Catholic Higher Education and Society at Large**

In these times of crippling polarization, the path to civility can be found in the conversation between faith and reason. Promoting this conversation is one way that Catholic higher education can help move society beyond impasse. Openness to new knowledge, realization that change is a sign of vitality, and resilience in adapting to challenging times are all ways in which the university can contribute to the dynamism of the Church and society. Careful reliance on both faith and reason is a corrective to fundamentalism and the temptation of magical thinking. One need not restrain one’s intellect to join the community of Catholic believers.

## Conclusion

Anselm of Canterbury's "Faith seeking understanding"<sup>1</sup> captures the fundamental aspiration of Catholic higher education from its beginnings to modern times. It points to the promise and possibility of Church and university collaboration. Reason insists on the highest quality of research and scholarship, as much as the provision for and support of faith exploration, Catholic worship, and ethical practice. The cooperation of Church and university is a reflection of the unity of faith and reason, and a practical implementation of this centuries-old conviction.



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<sup>1</sup>*Proslogion*, Chapter two.