

A Public School in a Catholic Neighborhood: The Core Curriculum at Notre Dame (2010)

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This morning I want to elaborate on a topic that was mentioned only in passing in Charles Rice's book [*What Happened to Notre Dame?* \(St. Augustine's Press, 2009\)](#) and in [my Introduction to the book](#), viz., the undergraduate core curriculum at Notre Dame—roughly, that part of the curriculum that does not belong to specific majors or minors.

In the Introduction to Rice's book I described present-day Notre Dame as “something like a public school in a Catholic neighborhood,” where it is the neighborhood, rather than the academic and intellectual life on campus, that most administrators and faculty members and students mainly have in mind when they invoke Notre Dame's “Catholic character.” What's more, even when it is vaguely hinted that this “Catholic character” ought to have some effect on the campus's intellectual life, one normally hears that the university aspires to be “Catholic *but* also intellectually excellent,” where that little word ‘but’ betrays the assumption that, in the estimation of the speaker, fidelity to Christ and his Church has to be balanced off against the quest for intellectual excellence. In other words, despite John Paul II's insistence to the contrary in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (1992) and *Fides et Ratio* (1998), there seems to be no inclination at all to believe that the Catholic Faith, with its impressive intellectual credentials and intellectual traditions, might actually contribute to intellectual excellence and situate us uniquely to remedy some of the serious and widely recognized problems that afflict American higher education these days.

One of those problems is the state of undergraduate education in contemporary research universities and, more specifically, the state of the core curriculum. Near the end of his recent book, [*God, Philosophy, and Universities* \(Rowman & Littlefield, 2009\)](#), my distinguished colleague Alasdair MacIntyre argues that contemporary research universities in effect cheat their undergraduate students by failing to provide them with a foundation as generalists that would give them the needed context for their training as specialists in particular disciplines or professions.

First I want to describe in very broad terms the sort of generalist education MacIntyre has in mind. A generalist foundation in the arts and sciences would be meant (a) to give the students a deeper appreciation for the different human ways of knowing that have been bequeathed to them in the various arts and sciences, (b) to give them the opportunity to reflect upon the various aspects of their own human-ness that are studied in the arts and sciences, (c) to make them see that an intellectually integrated understanding of the arts and sciences is an essential element in their own intellectually mature self-understanding, and to help them begin to forge such an integration for themselves, (d) to set these epistemological issues within the context of an overarching metaphysical framework that addresses enduring human questions regarding the good for individual human beings and for society, our relationship to God, the nature of human freedom, death and immortality, the meaning of human suffering, etc. Obviously, the desirability of this sort of coherent general foundation is even greater from a Catholic perspective, which (a)

holds that the best wisdom available to us will integrate the deliverances of reason that we have just outlined with the deliverances of the Catholic Faith and which (b) is confident because of its history that the Catholic claim to wisdom can answer on their own grounds whatever theoretical objections are posed to it. One simple way to sum up this sort of generalist education from a Catholic perspective would be to say that its aim is to produce intellectually mature Catholics and that, in combination with the more specialized training that a student receives within the university, its aim is to produce intellectually mature Catholic natural scientists, social scientists, historians, writers, sculptors, painters, literary experts, philosophers, theologians, doctors, lawyers, journalists, entrepreneurs, financiers, accountants, engineers, architects, etc.—and, I should add, intellectually mature Catholic mothers and fathers.

I do not have time here even to outline the sort of core curriculum that would emerge from this conception of what I take to be one of the central intellectual goals of a university education. As I envision it, there could be many alternative core curricula that are capable of fulfilling these goals. But within any given university this core ensures that students are at some point in their undergraduate career thinking about a common set of important intellectual issues and reading a common set of worthwhile books. (This in itself could have a positive effect on the intellectual atmosphere of dorm life—but that’s a whole different topic.) Every student at every Catholic college or university deserves a chance for this sort of initial intellectual formation. I say ‘initial’ because the sort of education I have in mind leads one to see that intellectual formation is itself an ongoing and life-long affair.

Unfortunately, at Notre Dame we really do not at present have anything like a core curriculum of the sort I have just pointed to—a claim that MacIntyre argued for quite trenchantly at a recent public symposium that also featured the president of the university and the dean of the college of arts and letters. Nor do we have a well-thought-out and coherent set of general intellectual goals like those set out above for undergraduate education. Every year at graduation time, when I hear all the high-minded and idealized talk about the integration of faith and reason at Notre Dame, I worry that very few of our graduates leave this place with anything like an *intellectually* integrated view of the world (or even the seeds of such) or with anything like an *intellectually* mature Faith. In this regard, we are just like a lot of other schools, both religious and secular, and especially like other research universities.

How does it come to be that research universities serve their undergraduates poorly? Even though, as far as I can tell, there is no theoretical contradiction between being a good research university and providing a first-rate generalist education of the sort described above, there are nonetheless certain traits endemic to contemporary research universities that militate against a sound generalist education. I have no doubt, by the way, that a genuinely *Catholic* university would have the vision and the intellectual, moral, and spiritual resources to counteract the tendencies I am about to identify.

The first problematic trait is that, for various reasons, faculty members in research universities tend to be reluctant to teach anything outside their own disciplines and sometimes even outside their own specialities within their disciplines. Remember that the vast majority of faculty members have not themselves had a generalist education of the sort described above. Besides, faculty members know that they will be judged mainly by

the quality and originality of their research, and so junior faculty are especially unwilling to spend more time than necessary on matters that do not have a direct, or least easily discernible indirect, connection with their specialities.

A second, and not unrelated, point is that contemporary research universities tend not to foster a deep-seated spirit of service with respect to undergraduates in general and their intellectual formation. Introductory courses for non-majors are most often handed off to graduate students, adjunct faculty, and junior faculty—or else taught by regular faculty members in huge sections. Even in the case of majors, advising systems within departments very often leave much to be desired—something that is unfortunately true at Notre Dame.

Third, it is no secret that with the 20th century demise of modernist optimism about the power of reason to establish important truths, many practitioners of the humanities have adopted varying degrees of epistemic pessimism—a pessimism that, at the very beginning of *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II decries as especially harmful to young people. Because of this, there is little agreement among faculty members about what the best sort of generalist education would even consist in. Hence, faculty members tend to be satisfied with a core curriculum, like the one at Notre Dame, that has degenerated into a disjointed set of ‘course distribution requirements’ which are guided by no comprehensive conception of what an educated Catholic college graduate should know and which are such that they can be satisfied by a wide variety of uncoordinated and unrelated courses that may or may not touch on important issues of the sort I mentioned above. Even introductory courses in philosophy vary greatly in content from one section to another. For instance, it is easily possible for a student to go through four years at Notre Dame without ever having read a single Platonic dialogue or a single line of Thomas Aquinas.

At Notre Dame, as at other research universities, the university itself masks these effects by appealing to the students’ autonomy, their freedom to choose, within loosely defined limits, their own core curriculum—even though the university does little to put them into a position to make wise choices or to help them distinguish their immediate educational *wants* from their genuine educational *needs*.

As I indicated above, a Catholic research university that had kept its principles straight and that had been self-confident about its intellectual mission could have forged a distinctive remedy for tendencies of the sort just noted. Still, absent that, is there anything we can do to help Notre Dame students get a generalist education whose aims include an intellectually integrated view of the world and an intellectually mature Catholic Faith? Because of faculty resistance, in part ideological and in part the consequence of a jealous desire to preserve disciplinary prerogatives, official curricular reform in the directions I have hinted at is for all practical purposes impossible. That is just a fact of life that all of us need to understand. The only remaining question is how, given this unfortunate fact, faithful Catholics who care about Notre Dame should try to deal with the problem of the core curriculum.

One piece of good news is that recent efforts to hire Catholics have had some degree of success, and so, in the first instance, interested students need good advice that will direct them to particular courses that are already available. Beyond that, the obvious line of

action is to continue the sort of guerilla warfare that some of us have long been waging from the periphery of the official curriculum—or even from outside the official curriculum, imitating the way that intellectually high-powered forms of campus ministry operate on certain secular campuses. There are hopeful signs that such initiatives—already operative in some places on campus—will multiply in the future.

In general, I believe that we have to be pro-active and creative in dealing with our present situation. To get mired in a merely reactive posture is to put ourselves on the losing side of an unwinnable war of attrition. We have to remember that we are first and foremost Catholics whose subservience to Christ frees us from subservience to any worldly power, including the powers which currently dominate the administrative structures of the university of Our Lady and which would like to domesticate zealous Christian witness on campus. In short, we need to let the Holy Spirit guide us to novel ways of dealing with difficult situations. We need to be attuned to unexpected opportunities. We need to remember, with C.S. Lewis, that Aslan is not a tame lion.