

## What Does It Mean To Be Catholic Enough?

Bishop Kevin J. Farrell

"If and when others may disagree or have a different approach or have a different slant on Catholic teaching or belief, honest debate, not confrontation, true dialogue where we seek to understand the other, not facile condemnation, should be the overarching way we move forward together," Bishop Kevin J. Farrell of Dallas said in his May 17 commencement address at the University of Dallas, an independent Catholic university in Irving, Texas. "And let us remember that the word 'heretic' has been reserved for precious few people in our Catholic tradition," he added. The bishop posed the question, "What does it **mean** to be **Catholic** enough?" and offered several possible answers: "It means adhering to the magisterium of the church and taking very seriously the length, breadth and depth of the Catholic tradition. ... It means taking very seriously the challenge which theologians in the church have always taken up - to face into and revere the contemporary culture and to relate revelation and our Catholic faith to that culture. ... It does not mean parroting words and phrases from one or another time and place in the church's history as though that were the only way to speak of things divine and of things Catholic. ... It means being a leaven in a society that seeks insight, example and inspiration even as it claims to be postreligion, postchurch and post-Christianity. ... It means being humble before God and each other, acknowledging that no one of us has all the answers." Bishop Farrell's address follows.

Last Jan. 9 a distinguished former trustee of this university, the Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, died. He had been hospitalized for only a few days but from the first moment it was clear that his days were numbered. He died as the highly acclaimed editor of *First Things*, a journal of religion, culture and public life.

Father Neuhaus was born and raised a Lutheran and, like others in his family, became a Lutheran pastor. By all accounts he was an articulate man of letters and ideas. He had an unassailable intellect and a gift for insight and clear thinking.

In 1987, while still a Lutheran, he authored a book titled *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in a Post-Modern World*. The book is a favorable portrait of post-Vatican II Catholic life and a plea that all Christians see in Catholicism great spiritual richness and depth, whose teachings should be at the forefront of influencing American culture at large. In a sense this book was a platform statement of what became his signature project in *First Things* - namely, to link religion, American culture and public life.

Like most things Neuhaus wrote, it was a highly acclaimed book. But, like most things Neuhaus wrote, it was also the catalyst for debate, refining and restating positions - the fruit of the kind of debate which he relished and which he was very skilled at! It received several highly favorable reviews and several reviews that took on the author's words and did him the service of engaging him, and, dare I say it, of taking him on.

One such review was by a trained, lifelong Roman Catholic teacher of theology who asked, in the end, was the book *The Catholic Moment* "Catholic enough"? The reviewer wondered whether Neuhaus' take on Catholicism might be too narrow, too limiting, too idealized.

Now, let us be clear, no one book can ever be Catholic enough. No one book about the Catholic Church can ever represent over 2,000 years of a faith tradition that has engaged the finest of minds focused on articulating its beliefs and practices in ever new and different ways.

No one book about Catholicism can adequately reflect over 2,000 years of influencing and being influenced by the myriad of cultures that comprise the world today and that have comprised the world for these two millennia and counting.

No one book about Catholicism can ever be true to the variety of religious communities and Catholic spiritualities that have coexisted under the umbrella of Catholicism for 2,000 years.

But if this is the case then we need to be self-critical and realize that no one of us has the only approach to Catholicism. We need to be humble and realize that there have been very many moments and at very different times that could and should be called Catholic moments. We are the inheritors of over 2,000 years of Catholic moments. Catholic moments from across the globe that have embraced the wealth of cultures that have populated and will populate this good earth.

I say this before this gathering at this commencement from this Catholic university - with its unique and much needed mission in today's American society. Among the stated goals are that:

-The University of Dallas is committed to the study and development of the Western tradition of liberal education and the Catholic intellectual tradition.

-The University of Dallas seeks to maintain the dialogue of faith and reason while assuring the proper autonomy of each of the arts, sciences and professions.

The mission statement and goals are in complete harmony with the vision of a Catholic university as articulated by Pope John Paul II in his important letter *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* ("From the Heart of the Church").

The mission statement and goals also stand in accord with the teachings of Pope Benedict XVI when he articulated what a Catholic university is and should be to an audience of leaders in Catholic education from across the United States when he spoke in Washington, D.C, just over a year ago. That address was from a trained academic theologian to his colleagues in the theological academy and those working in the ministry of Catholic education.

He thanked American Catholics for their commitment to education, which he characterized as "integral to the mission of the church to proclaim the good news." He then immediately explicated how the study of theology is to be seen in a wide context including "personal encounter, knowledge and Christian witness." Then he said that these three elements are integral to what he termed "the diakonia ("service") of truth which the church exercises in the midst of humanity." My own suspicion is that it will take us some time, individually and collectively, especially on a university campus such as this, to unpack what the phrase the diakonia of truth means and implies.

The word truth occupies center stage in Pope Benedict's understanding of the challenge believers have - to be faithful to the Gospel and to the truth that guides our minds and hearts. But the rich term diakonia lays down a major challenge for us to see what we do here at this university as truly in service to the truth, a truth that indeed sets us free but a Gospel truth that is also paradoxical and sometimes all too challenging to be embraced in its fullness.

The Holy Father also said that "Catholic identity is not simply a question of the number of Catholic students" nor can it be equated "with orthodoxy of course content." Among other things Catholic identity means teaching and learning with conviction, based on a fundamental and deepening conversion - committing ourselves "intellect and will, mind and heart to God" - and a commitment that is given "fervent expression liturgically, sacramentally, through acts of prayer, charity and a concern for justice and a respect for God's creation."

The word integral comes to mind as the Holy Father moved us to consider our role as students, graduates and professors in this university and our vocation to serve the truth with the hard work and rigor of an academic discipline, and also with the hard work and discipline required for believers always to deepen our personal commitment to and witness of the truth of our faith. We study and teach the high points (and sometimes the low points as well) of the theological enterprise which is Catholicism not as interesting museum pieces and things to be lightly touched and politely observed. No, we study the Catholic tradition from the inside with commitment and pride as well as appropriate critique and analysis that sometimes leads to reformulating and recasting what we have come to know - and be convinced of - for the church in ever new circumstances.

I cannot help but think of the spiritual heritage of St. Benedict, which gratefully looms large on and within this Catholic university given the presence for close to six decades of Cistercian fathers and brothers. St. Benedict's rule for monks is a model of moderation and integration. It has often been called a model of moderation containing nothing extreme in the way the monastic life should be carried out.

The same should be said of the debate over ideas and truth that is carried out in a Catholic university. Dogmatism, closed-mindedness, judgmentalism, suspicion, especially of another's motives, can have no place in a university where debate and the refining of positions are our stock in trade. Unfortunately, that kind of behavior can mark and does mark the blogosphere culture in which we live. It should have no place in this academic community, where the search for truth requires hard work, humility and profound mutual respect.

If and when others may disagree or have a different approach or have a different slant on Catholic teaching or belief, honest debate, not confrontation, true dialogue where we seek to understand the other, not facile condemnation, should be the overarching way we move forward together. And let us remember that the word heretic has been reserved for precious few people in our Catholic tradition. One has to be very smart to be a heretic. One must be publicly defiant of the church to be a true heretic.

Verbal fratricide has no place in an academic community which seeks to know and to live the truth which is Jesus Christ himself. There is a wideness in God's mercy. There is wideness in the Catholic embrace of thought in every age and in the ways in which Catholic belief can and needs to be expressed.

Recent popes have been valiant and prophetic voices for us about what it means to be Catholic. A perennial question is what does it **mean** to be **Catholic** enough?

-It seems to me that it means adhering to the magisterium of the church and taking very seriously the length, breadth and depth of the Catholic tradition.

-It means taking very seriously the characteristically Catholic integration of official church teaching, other voices in this theological tradition, our liturgical and sacramental traditions and practices, the variety of spiritualities and prayer forms that it has encouraged and fostered as

well as its artistic and aesthetic accomplishments, again with a rich variety reflecting the people and the needs of the church in any and every age.

-It means taking very seriously the challenge which theologians in the church have always taken up - to face into and revere the contemporary culture and to relate revelation and our Catholic faith to that culture. The way that was done in one age will necessarily have to be different in another age. There is simply no one system than can be considered the systematic reflection of the Catholic tradition. It is too broad and far-reaching for that.

-It means taking very seriously our diversity as a worldwide Catholic Church within a comprehensive unity of people, places and eras in the family album that is Catholicism.

-It means realizing that our understanding of the human person can be influenced by such theological giants as Augustine, Benedict, Bonaventure, Aquinas, among many others and on whom we can rely for insight and help. There is no one answer to what and who is the human person. Catholicism gives us several.

-It means realizing that we can follow a spiritual path laid out by martyrs, monks, mendicants, missionaries, postmoderns and millennials. There is no one Catholic spirituality or way of approaching God in ascetical practices, prayer forms or devotions.

-It means being open to new questions, new cultures, new circumstances and being willing to learn from them as well as to reformulate teachings in them.

-It does not mean parroting words and phrases from one or another time and place in the church's history as though that were the only way to speak of things divine and of things Catholic.

-It means a very serious study of the sources of our theological tradition with academic rigor and discipline and applying them to the needs of today in light of questions never asked before in the history of the human family but which are questions which you and I need to ask and must ask for credibility, not to say our survival - as a church and as a university.

-It means being proud of the Catholic intellectual tradition but never to be smug, dismissive or righteous about it or in the face of others whose beliefs are different.

-It means being a leaven in a society that seeks insight, example and inspiration even as it claims to be postreligion, postchurch and post-Christianity.

-It means being concerned for the common good and the good of others when a certain preoccupation with the self seems to prevail. What good is self-help if the only one to be helped is oneself?

-It means being humble as a faith tradition that is semper reformanda, always in need of being reformed, again and again, until we are the true, perfect church God has called us to be.

-It means being humble before God and each other, acknowledging that no one of us has all the answers to the question, What does it **mean** to be **Catholic** enough? We know well that no one of us can ever have all the answers. No theologian or professor or pope has ever had or ever will have all the answers to what it means to be authentically and fully Catholic.

After Father Richard Neuhaus' unexpected death, there were tributes to and about him from the four corners of the globe. As he was in life, so he was in death - acclaimed and revered. Yet he was also challenged and critiqued. It seems to me that this is what the theological community of a Catholic university should do and be. That is a "community of scholars" (as Pope John Paul II put it) that acclaims, appropriates, critiques and lives what Catholicism believes, teaches, professes and is.

A Catholic university should always be grounded in what it has been given from generations before us. But it should also be faithful to its mission of handing that over to the next generations of those yet unborn who deserve to receive the best of what Catholicism has to offer.

It should be no surprise that I believe that there have been and will still yet be many, many Catholic moments, times when the church strives to work toward the integration of religion, culture and public life. One of the chief means for that to occur is on a Catholic campus such as this.

It is with deep affection that I wish you graduates well. I challenge you to go forth from these special years of learning and formation in the faith to live what you have learned here and to love the Catholic tradition. It is my prayer that you will be part of forging ever new Catholic moments - for your sakes and for the sake of the Catholic tradition to which we are committed and which we hold dear.

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