

# Universities must teach church's intellectual tradition

PITTSBURGH – In America and the world today, many people perceive religion and intellectual life as adversaries, but a major task of a Catholic university is to counteract this view by revealing the depth and riches of the Catholic intellectual tradition, according to Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago.

Cardinal George, who also is president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, made the comments in a recent address at Duquesne University on “The Importance of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Life of a Catholic University, the Church and Society.”

“If anyone thinks (the subject of this lecture is) not ambitious enough, perhaps we could add its importance to the world and eternal life as well. It wouldn’t be hubris to do so, because the Catholic intellectual tradition is not only important but crucial at the deepest level in all these dimensions of human life,” said Cardinal George.

He was the inaugural speaker for the Richard T. and Marion A. Byrnes lecture series at Duquesne’s McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts.

“The body of reflections on the truths of our faith represents the collective wisdom of some very bright and very holy men and women from every part of the world over two millennia,” the cardinal said.

“It draws on thousands of years of prior Jewish experience and other cultures in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, the whole heritage of classical Greece and Rome, the rise and fall of the civilizations of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the scientific revolution, Romanticism, Modernism, and in our own lives, our globalized postmodern culture,” said the cardinal.

He spent part of the lecture exploring aspects of the teachings of great theologians and philosophers.

There is “nothing as remotely universal” as the Catholic intellectual tradition, given

“its reach into time, into space and into eternity,” he said.

“It proposes to unite faith and reason in mutual complementarity,” Cardinal George noted.

He said an important task today is to make sure all Catholic undergraduates, whether at a Catholic or secular institution, be exposed to and respectful of the Catholic intellectual tradition.

Today many people think one attends college to prepare for a career, he remarked.

“That is certainly one quite important thing that one does when he or she engages in higher studies. But if that is all that is done, the student will be missing something, and universities themselves run the danger of being reduced to high-class trade schools,” Cardinal George said.

“Before, during and after our working lives, we are human beings who must be preparing for eternal life,” he said.

The Catholic intellectual tradition provides a developed body of thought, tested by many different people in a wide variety of circumstances over many centuries, Cardinal George said.

For example, he said, “When we read a great Christian teacher like St. Augustine, especially in his ‘Confessions,’ we enter into the same process that he went through, slowly coming to understand and internalize the truths of the faith. The Catholic intellectual tradition, almost by definition, is an education in great books and great souls.”

In a question-and-answer session after the lecture, he said many Catholic universities, unfortunately, are not succeeding in fostering the tradition, but added, “I have seen it (flourishing) in a good number of places, and it’s very encouraging.”

“Sometimes it’s because a university itself encourages it, and sometimes it’s because a university doesn’t encourage it, and people get curious as to why not,” he added.

Cardinal George said conversion can occur on many levels – intellectual, moral and

spiritual – but is most likely to be nurtured in an environment in which “young people find a living faith community.”

“They’re looking for a way of life, and (this is) very attractive because it liberates us,” he said. “The church is where you go when you want to be free. That’s a kind of countercultural statement these days but it’s true – if the church is what she is supposed to be.”

But young people need teachers, he emphasized.

“This is (taking place) not only where you have witnesses, but where you have faculty – even if they are not teaching theology or philosophy – who nonetheless have a grasp of the Catholic intellectual tradition and serve as mentors to young people,” Cardinal George said. “That’s when you see something very good happening.”