



AMERICAN CULTURE AND CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

Loyola University Chicago



*Lectio Magistralis* by Card. Gianfranco Ravasi on the occasion of the conferral of the *laurea h.c.* at Loyola University Chicago

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It is with great emotion that I come to speak in this glorious American educational and cultural institution. The fundamental sentiment of gratitude for the honour that has been reserved for me is entwined with admiration for this place which exalts the Catholic presence in the United States and shows the liveliest, most authentic face of the Society of Jesus. I thank, then, the academic authorities and the student body, among whom I feel ideally welcomed. This is an experience that is particularly dear to me, having spent the greater part of my life in university teaching.

Certainly, I am a European and have visited this country only a few times, but from a distance I have always taken an interest in your culture, especially in the literature that it has offered – beginning with nineteenth century authors Dickinson, Poe, Whitman, Hawthorne, London, Melville, Mark Twain, Henry James and others – an extraordinary portrait of existence and of human society. And again in the twentieth century, you produced a true and proper gallery of authors of universal acclaim, such as Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Kerouac, Flannery O'Connor, Salinger, Roth, Bellow, Updike and others. One writer from my own country, the Italian Mario Soldati, in his work *America primo amore*, affirmed that “America is not just a part of the world. America is a state of mind, a passion. Any European can, at any time, fall sick with Americanitis.”

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The reason for this attraction is manifold and comes from the original identity of American civilisation. It is a question that was already being asked in 1782 in a lapidary style by John Hector St. John de Crevecoeur in his *Letters from an American Farmer*: “What, then, is the American, this new man?” Responses have been many, and were already anticipated in the same *Declaration of Independence of the United States of America* (1776): the values of equality, of unalienable rights of life and liberty, of the common good, of hospitality through social inclusion of foreigners are the most genuine physiognomy of the citizen of the United States.

Europeans discovered in this portrait of *homo americanus* qualities that had been celebrated in the Old Continent but that had flailed there and sometimes had become extinct. Emblematic of this in the eighteenth century is the figure of the French statesman Alexis de Tocqueville who in his essay *De la démocratie en Amérique* established an antithetic dialectic parallel between the outcomes of the French Revolution and of the American one: "The Revolution in the United States was produced by a mature and thoughtful taste for liberty, and not by a vague and undefined instinct for independence. It was not based upon passions for disorder; on the contrary, it proceeded with love of order and of legality."

This does not mean that American culture itself has not perceived its own limits, beginning with its own presidents such as Thomas Jefferson who in his *Notes on Virginia* did not hesitate to write: "I fear for my country when I reflect that God is just." Famous intellectuals such as Truman Capote or Norman Mailer or Noam Chomsky have sunk the sword of criticism harshly into the social texture of the United States. Others such as David Riesman and especially Christopher Lasch with his famous essay *The Culture of Narcissism* have noted the tangled knots, the weaknesses, the crises that shook those values considered as patrimony of the American society.

In this evermore complex context, marked now by the new information and digital revolution, which is generating an unprecedented anthropological and sociological phenotype, how can the Catholic cultural presence be situated? It is known that the concept of "culture" is no longer that of the enlightenment aristocracy which referred to the arts, the sciences and philosophy. Now, instead, culture designates the complex whole of values and symbols, objective, collective and transversal held by people across the social classes. In this light, the Christian message takes on a profound meaning for it can enrich and transform the same traditional founding values of the American culture. These values, in fact, in many aspects belong to a basic anthropological category, now subject to many criticisms and variations, but nevertheless important. We refer here to the concept of "human nature".

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It expresses itself in American society in some typologies that allow a fruitful dialogue with Christian understanding. As a fundamental premise, an extraordinary *lóghion* or saying of Christ can be chosen, a true and proper tweet *ante litteram*, composed in the Greek of the Gospels in only 53 characters, including spaces: "Give unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God!" (*Matthew 22:21*). Always in the life, culture, history and in the same American Constitution, Church and State have been rigorously distinct and separate. Society and religion, however, are not. Indeed between the two there is always an attraction and a tension, an encounter, sometimes a clash, but never separation or indifference. The history of many other countries is built on this dialectic.

The Catholic University must also participate in this encounter of faith and society, offering its own rigorously defined and studied *Weltanschauung*. It can sustain and enrich some equilibria on which contemporary society, particularly American society, is built. We can give some examples of these balances or equilibria in outline:

- On one side, there is the importance of the human person and so of individual identity and dignity.

On the other side, the common good must be made, and the development of the *polis*, that is the entire community.

- On one side, the affirmation of liberty with its creativity and rights.

On the other, the affirmation of the duties of justice, solidarity, respect and living together.

- On one side, there is an economic commitment for wellbeing.

On the other, the safeguarding of ethical, spiritual and cultural values for “man does not live by bread alone”.

- On one side, the diverse original ethno-cultural identities must express themselves in their variety and richness.

On the other, democracy is a common perimeter within which all must know how to coexist, sharing some values and fundamental unifying symbols.

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We could continue at length this list of poles of coexistence and illustrate them in light of the Christian message and the Social Doctrine of the Church, without prevaricating fundamentalisms but also without absences or silences that impoverish common existence. But to do this the Catholic university must endow itself with a competent and educational intellectual apparatus. There are, then, two primary components to be developed: education and instruction.

The first has to do with the formation of the person as a whole. This is what the great French moral thinker Michel de Montaigne affirmed incisively when he suggested the educator should prefer “*plutôt la tête bien faite que bien pleine*”; there is a need to shape the way we think and not just fill the brain with data, notions and information. This is why it is important to have not just instruction but also an integral education of the person – spiritually, morally, intellectually, artistically, physically, sportively and socially.

A famous English thinker of the eighteenth century, the philosopher, theologian and also cardinal, John Henry Newman, had no hesitation to declare in his work *The Idea of a University* that Catholic university education, before forming Christians or Catholics, should create “gentlemen”. That university should form the student for life and not just for the school is not just a rhetorical phrase – long ago formulated by the Latin philosopher Seneca (*Non vitae, sed scholae discimus*) – but it is the programme on which the Catholic educational institution must be built. This, as I said, is the most complete sense of “culture”.

There is, however, a second component that is intrinsically connected to the first and it is the strictly intellectual one: instruction. This begins with the extraordinary cultural patrimony Christianity has offered over the centuries in all disciplines. It is the inheritance of art, science, and thought, and is united intimately with the spiritual and moral Christian vision of man, of woman, and of society. Along these lines, the Catholic university must establish a constant encounter with the global cultural horizon and this is what has been happening for nearly two centuries in an exemplary manner at Loyola University Chicago. I think, for example, of the dialogue with science through the specific faculties of science and engineering, gathering the challenges that technology poses to bioethics and that post-humanism launches at Christian anthropology itself. I think too of the world of the economic-financial disciplines that require a formation of a humanistic kind, not just a merely technical one.

And I think too of the encounter with the world of art in its new expressive grammars in architecture, painting or sculpture, in music, cinema and in television. I think of the attention that has to be given to communication that has adopted not just new instruments but also created a new environment that surrounds the entire world through the world wide web.

In this intellectual work, the presence of teaching Catholic theology acquires a particular significance. Its specific epistemological statute can, in fact, dialogue with those of other cultural disciplines without prevaricating and without being timid. Christianity in its primary ideals and foundational morals is open to dialogue with the different spiritual expressions and, so, the Catholic university becomes the home for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

These and the other experiences you have, are for the universal Church a great inspirational model, especially for the inculturation of the faith and for a Church that is outgoing, or “goes forth” as pope Francis affirms in *Evangelii gaudium*. In today’s secularised society and in the great anonymous super cities, what dominates is not atheism, but apathe-ism, that is religious apathy, indifference to ethical and spiritual values. The presence of a university community such as this at Loyola can bring about the programme that Christ had proposed to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, through an efficacious trilogy of images: “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world. A city that is on top of a mountain cannot remain hidden” (*Matthew 5:13-14*).